

Leonard Pollara, Narrator

Anneliese Abbott, Interviewer

June 23, 2021

Location: Remote over Zoom

LP=Leonard Pollara

AA=Anneliese Abbott

AA: All right, today is June 23, 2021. This is Anneliese Abbott, and I'm doing an oral history interview with—

LP: Leonard Pollara

AA: So Leonard, thank you so much for being able to do this interview today. So would you mind starting out just telling everyone a little about your background and how you got interested in organic agriculture?

LP: Good question. So a little about my background. I'm, to extract the salient points for agriculture, my father and mother had farmed in the '40s and '50s. My father started a family farm in the 1940s in New Jersey in Sussex County. He met my mother, they farmed for a while, they left in 1956 to New Mexico, which was where I was born. And then in the intervening years they moved back to New Jersey for health reasons for my father. And moved back to New Jersey because that's where there was family, and he was uncertain whether or not he would live. And so they re-introduced themselves to his mother and brother, who now lived on what had been the family farm. We took—my parents rented the property in Passaic, New Jersey, which was the best that they could afford. Their concern and consideration was a location that was sufficiently—well, comparatively inexpensive, of course, which is all relative—and close to Newark, New Jersey, which is where my father got a job. And we also visited as a family this family farm in Montague, New Jersey initially. Just once or twice.

And then in the very early 1970s my grandmother appealed to my parents to help her pay the rent—or the mortgage, rather—sorry, there was no mortgage—the taxes because she was living on a fixed income social security, which you can imagine at that time was tiny. And so they agreed that if they were going to engage in helping her with that that we would need to become more involved. And so on the 4 ½ acre piece that was my grandmother's, we began to develop a much more expanded kitchen garden and ultimately started market gardening. So what a market garden is is basically you have a piece of property that most people in this country might not consider a farm. You produce things in the garden for yourself, and you sell the excess. My mother was really quite aggressive about selling. So we sold to the local food town market in Passaic, in our neighborhood. And developed a relationship with them back in the day when there were still produce stores, when you would go to a produce store, which is kind of a rarity nowadays. So the food town, the supermarket concept was evolving. And the manager of the supermarket wanted to be able to compete with the local produce store. And so they bought stuff from my mother.

We as a family, some of the most notable things, one summer, I think the summer I was 14, we canned 109 quarts of string beans. So we were pretty busy. It was sizeable. I would say it was probably all of 2 acres. And we worked it, we did have some equipment that we used for tillage. But other than that it was all hand work, the harvesting, etc., etc. So that developed and evolved. When I was 16 we had in probably maybe a fifth of an acre, a sixth of an acre block of potatoes that we had planted. And it was my task to dust them. We were still using chemicals at that point. My father, who actually had worked at the college farm at Rutgers University and graduated with a degree in animal husbandry in the early '40s, World War II era, was sort of entering agriculture on the leading edge of what was then called the Green Revolution but actually was the escalation of the use of target chemicals on farms. Recognizing that chemicals like Bordeaux mixture, which I believe is limestone and another thing, had been used on controlling funguses on grapes for a long time. Chemical use in agriculture has happened for a long time, but not to the sort of designed extent that was taking place in the '40s and '50s. And then of course by the '70s, we had organophosphates and other chemicals.

So it was my job to dust. We had a backpack sprayer and we also had a Hudson duster. Which is a device where you put a powdered chemical into the hopper, and there's a blower with a long snorkel and a diffuser tip that would create a fan of dust that you would walk along and dust your crop with. And we were particularly dusting for Colorado potato beetles. And so the chemical we were using for that was a chemical called Sevin. And being an entirely too smart 16-year-old, I ignored the cautions and insistences of my parents about how to proceed. They weren't watching, it was hot, it was July. So I went and looked at the bag of chemicals, and on the front it said in pretty big letters, "Not harmful to humans." So I figured, "Okay, no big deal." So I stripped off my shirt, I was wearing just work boots and shorts. Took off the respirator. And dusted, the stuff didn't smell bad, it was sort of a sweetish kind of smell. So I dusted the potatoes.

And then for the next three days I bled. So I went to a doctor to figure out what the bleeding was from, and I went and looked at the bag of chemicals, and in the small print it explained that the way that it acted on the insects was by causing their gut to rupture. And once again, back in the day, went to the family doctor, and the family doctor, after examining me and listening to what I did, basically said, "Well, I guess you won't do that again." Which was the sum total of the treatment that I got. However, at that point, you can imagine a teenager who was, I think teenagers are acutely tuned into what appear to be hypocrisies or inconsistencies. I really keyed on the fact that what the company will write on the front of their label in big letters is what they want you to read to buy it, and the stuff that they write in the small print on the back of the label, which is mandated by regulation, may be the information that you need to keep you alive.

And so I was really just started thinking about and looking for other things. My parents were horrified, and I guess—and, of course, you can't imagine the conversation that the parents have until you're a parent, but I would suspect that they had a conversation along the lines of, if something like this is going to happen, who cares about a few bugs? We don't want our kids to be killed. If they're not going to listen to what we tell them and how we teach them, then we've got two choices. Either don't have them do the work, or get rid of the chemicals. So we really pretty much as a family backed off. The only things we had around was a product called Black Leaf 40, which is actually nicotine sulfate. And we only used that to, in like a cement block wall or cinder block wall, where there are cavities, to spray some of that in the cavities to kill nests of wasps or hornets, that kind of thing. Which is really actually kind of interesting, because as I

evolved as an organic farmer, I really embraced wasps and hornets. And the only ones that I ever killed were the ones that were trying to live in the house with me and my family. I considered them as allies more and more and became far less dismayed at their presence and considered it an advantage.

I don't know if that answered the question fully, or partially, or whatever. (10:46)

AA: Yeah. That's really helpful. So do you want to tell me a little more, if you want to go a little bit briefly into your involvement with the various organic organizations and things, if you want to do a little summary of that, that would be great.

LP: Sure. I had a chance to think about that. And so with the questions that you sent me, what I did, and let me see if I can actually find it, because I found it even interesting as I wrote it down. So getting into organic agriculture, first, when I started farming as my business, ultimately the short story of the farm is, in 1987 I started spending a lot more time at the farm, although I was working in, I was still going to college and working in New York City nights as a musician. But I started to become more engaged with the farm, with things that I was doing there. And then 1989 I actually registered a business. In 1992 purchased the farm from my father. And there were two lots. There was a 4 ½ acre property which had been the family farm. Coincidentally, that was the year that my grandmother passed away. Shortly after my grandmother passed away, I think--no, she died in '90. So just a couple years after she passed away.

So I was looking to develop a farm business. How does one go about doing that? We purchased a 4 ½ acre piece of property and purchased an adjacent 10 acre piece of property that had been my mother and fathers. So I had 10 acres in two unattached but adjacent properties. So I went to the township to see if I would have access to agricultural taxes to reduce the real estate tax base. And one of the details that I brought to the table to demonstrate that I was actually engaged in farming, prior to that I had gone to the NRCS, which is the Natural Resources Conservation Service in the USDA, and applied for cooperator status. Which essentially, if you have a large piece of property and you apply as a cooperator with the NRCS, you have available all of their history and records about highly erodible land, soil types, etc., etc. Much of that is all free and publicly available. But they will compile it into a concise format for you.

And so I applied as a cooperator with them, only to discover that my father had been a cooperator back in the very beginning. I think he may have even been the first cooperator, because of his awareness through his college education, in that community with the NRCS. And he had gotten cost share funding to build a drainage structure or excavate a drainage structure through the meadow on the front. And so they just sort of piggybacked me on that and said, "Okay, there's been years without any activity, but we can certainly do this." So that actually in large part helped credentialize my activity. In addition to what I could show from earning from the farming. I was providing hay to a friend's operation that I was helping collaborate with in a very loose partnership arrangement. Nothing to do with organic agriculture. But I was trending in that direction. I had been reading *Mother Jones* for years. A friend gave me all of their family's old *Organic Gardening* magazines from back in the '70s. So I was catching up.

And it seemed to me that another entity that would be a valuable resource in the development of my business was to join the county board of agriculture, which I did. Where I met a gentleman named Les Guiles, who was an organic farmer in Augusta, which is a nearby farm. Who was basically had asked me if I was interested in getting certified organic. Because NOFA-New Jersey had just started offering organic certification at that time. So that introduced

me to NOFA-New Jersey, which I joined immediately. And I may have the dates, there is a little bit of difference, I think I actually did the NRCS and the county board, I joined that either in late '90 or early '91, because I was working towards credentialing my farming activity. And then in '92 got certified with NOFA. And from 1992 until 2010 maintained organic certification, either with NOFA-New Jersey or with the National Organic Program when that came into being.

And so participating in NOFA, I became more active with NOFA-New Jersey. I volunteered to participate in the certification committee. At that time we had a certification administrator who would take in the applications and review them. And once they were deemed complete, provide them to the inspectors to inspect them. And then the certification committee would review both the application and the certification reports to make a recommendation for certification to the board, who would then certify the operations. Of course I was absent from the room and didn't participate in any conversations about my own operation. So it felt ethical and correct.

And then as I participated with that group, I became more engaged with some of the other folks at NOFA-New Jersey. Jennifer Morgan to be sure. The group of farmers, a number of farmers whose names stand out, Ted Stevens, Les Guiles, who introduced me. Oh, Ed Lidzbarski was another one. Jim Kinsel. Just a group of people who were really all pointed in the same direction. Some who had figured things out and were working their way forward, and others like myself who were figuring things out in terms of organic agriculture in New Jersey. And Jennifer Morgan, who was the executive director, had been trying to help develop market space for organic producers in New Jersey. Was approached by a gentleman who asked her if she could guarantee them, and I'm pretty sure at the time it was a thousand cases a week of organic tomatoes. Which was just a staggering number by comparison to what we were producing. But that motivated conversations.

And so we, a group of farmers, seven I think or eight farmers, started the organic tomato project where we collaborated to fill the needs. So we were serving orders for King Supermarket and some other purchasers as a disparate but collective group of growers. As is always the case, some farmers excelled. Some farmers shifted to other crop product profiles. And other farmers among us shifted to different market arenas. But at least in the first little bit, that seemed to be a very wildly successful, at least in terms of seeing what the market was. And it very quickly became clear that the market was far greater than we could supply, at least with our land base and all that. (20:35)

As my participation in that escalated, my participation in the county board of agriculture increased to the point where I was ultimately elected president of the county board and also elected as representative to the Rutgers board of managers, which is the advisory board to the executive dean of the agricultural college and the executive director of the agricultural experiment station. And so that once again elevated my activity and awareness in agriculture and my participation in agriculture in the state, and also politically in the state.

And consecutive to that, I joined or became elected as an officer on the board of directors of NOFA-New Jersey, during which time I was also elected as a representative to the NOFA Interstate Council. The Northeast Organic Farming Association has seven state chapter members, and the Interstate Council was doing some really interesting work, advocacy and support, basically, for organic agriculture.

And during that period of time, we're through the '90s and kind of into the 2000s now, I applied to be able to submit testimony to one of the hearings, the listening sessions that Congress was doing around the country for the, I think it was the 2000 farm bill or the 2005 farm bill. I

think it was the 2000 farm bill. And you know how that is, they always have the, everything is sort of tiled in time because of the way government works. But I had been in DC, I had been lobbying on behalf of the experiment station and Rutgers University, Rutgers, Cook College at that time was the college of Agriculture, so I had been back and forth already and engaged in lobbying. I had done lobbying at the state on behalf of organic farmers and farmers and farming. As a representative from my county, but also representing points of opinion for the New Jersey Farm Bureau Federation, of which I was a member. And so I was really quite active in a lot of conversation and a lot of trying to focus grassroots activity to a point of action at governmental levels.

So I would say that I don't suppose you could say anything more than that I was fully immersed. So New Jersey is a little different than other states. New Jersey has a very representative agricultural body that is legislatively determined. And so the farmers and the county boards of agriculture collaborate with the Farm Bureau Federation and have both a Farm Bureau Federation convention and a farmer convention, an ag convention. The ag convention votes and determines who are going to be the state board of agriculture members and also the state board of agriculture is directly advisory to the governor and also responsible for promoting individuals to the position of secretary of agriculture. It also helped that a number of—so through the evolution of activity, I and Karen Anderson, who was the executive director of NOFA in the beginning 2000s, seeing the writing on the wall, there had been years of conversations that the cost of certification was draining resources from the NOFA-New Jersey that could be spent to do more outreach and advocacy in the community and help support farmers more.

And so we spearheaded, and I would say that Karen did most of the work, although I was a participant and contributor. We worked as a team and spearheaded an effort that eventually, Governor Florio signed a bill establishing the organic certification program within the New Jersey State Department of Agriculture. At which point we shifted our certification administrator, who at that time was a gentleman named Erich Bremmer. We were very lucky to have found a very diligent and committed person. And well-skilled. So Erich Bremmer then shifted over to the state. There was a transition year where we transitioned all of the farmers over to that program in the state. And then at that point NOFA-New Jersey ceased offering certification as a program.

So we had a winter conference. The winter conferences were held in various locations. I think that we had, for many years we had really fabulous attendance. And what does that mean? We might have, and I want to say 300-plus people at a conference. We had members come offering contact with trade elements, and etc., etc. So they were really well received. Subsequent to my being president and more recently, periodically I have done presentations at those winter conferences. Still, I've also presented at the NOFA annual summer event, which is the collective NOFA annual summer event held in Massachusetts for a number of different topics.

Yeah, I don't know. I've talked myself through a time sequence. I'm sure I left a ton of stuff out, but I think that's enough for framing. (28:19)

AA: Yeah, thank you very much. So is there anything you want to share about your farming methods? How you chose those and developed them, and what influenced you to use those farming methods?

LP: Yeah. I think that probably is, of all the questions you sent me, believe it or not, that one and the philosophies of organic farming, are two of the really most profound questions. And I've

given that a tremendous amount of thought over the years that I have been farming. And so when I started farming, my father, and I am eternally grateful to him for having his opinion and holding it, believed that you should learn how to farm in a fundamental way before you move on to the technologically advanced methods. I think he may have just been being clever because we didn't have the money to buy fancy equipment. But I think he also started farming that way. And subsequently when he was at the college farm, learned more technologically advanced for the period methods. And so he and his generation had the opportunity to see the juxtaposition or the evolution of those technologies, let's call it.

And so I learned how to make hay with a scythe, we mowed by hand, did a lot of hand mowing. I am not qualified to say whether or not I was good at it or great at it. But we very quickly moved to a sickle bar mower. And then raking and making hay, we didn't have a baler, so we stacked it. So I learned how to make haystacks, which in and of itself is an art. The vegetable growing that we did and the food production that we did, the planting was all by hand. And it was, we had a small area to work with, so it was diverse. Very diverse. And we sort of naturally practiced a rotation because in the wisdom of the "old timers" you didn't grow the same thing in the same place two years in a row because what that plant took from the soil, it required time for the soil to restore or regain. At least that was the very crude kind of thinking. Or unrefined; I won't call it crude. Unrefined thinking.

And so I never did farm without using a rotation, without a very biologically diverse crop profile, and without real integration of different aspects of the farm. The only thing that we did not directly engage in ourselves was animal production, because we didn't live there. So it would not have made sense for us to try to do that. However, let me tell you, there were plenty of deer, more deer than we could shake a stick at, and rabbits and groundhogs and all kinds of every other animal. And we did not fence out our garden. So the advantages of having that as a casual adjunct to what we were doing, in addition to the disadvantages, because they ate plenty. But then again, we ate them, so it seemed like an appropriate kind of tradeoff.

It was really a bit of a lesson just the concept of how you function in a complex environment like that and how you can function, and the advantages and disadvantages. So I was looking at that. But I also watched my grandmother, who emigrated to the United States from Hungary when she was twelve or thirteen and had grown up in Hungary. Her father, my great-grandfather, had been a forester for the king. And they had a small mill. And everybody farmed. Everybody grew their food. If you didn't grow your food, you didn't eat, unless you were really, really wealthy.

And so one of the things that over time has really shaped my thinking and understanding I believe of the realities of agriculture is that we as a society and many other societies, because of the evolution and development of technological assets, technological tools, technologically superior tools in terms of saving human labor and the apparent saving of time, we have moved away from farming at a human scale. Now there's much to be said for equipment, there's a lot to be said for equipment in terms of how advantageous it is and how much you can accomplish with fine-tuned equipment. I mean fine-tuned in the sense that it is a tool set or an equipment set that is a tool and designed to meet the requirements of the crops that you're producing. But the reality is that as fewer and fewer people are needed to produce more and more food, the population moved to other pursuits of manufacturing and service industries where you can become far more financially stable than you could with a farm, have a greater ease and comfort and indolence in your lifestyle than with farming, and still have access to food because of the comparative really inexpensive cost of food.

Now I wanted to understand why that was the case, and what I learned through my own studies was that during World War I when the United States was trying to provision their army overseas, they did so using farm support. But also, going to American farmers, when you had ten thousand small farms or a hundred thousand small farms, each of whom had a couple of cows for milk and maybe a cow or two for meat, and maybe some sheep and maybe some pigs and maybe some chickens, and produced some corn and some potatoes. And each one had maybe their focus cash crop, but they also grew a broad diversity of other crops. As a government trying to buy enough provisions to feed an army, it was daunting. You had to purchase from each individual. So just the logistics of buying the food and getting it where it needed to be in time for supporting your military was really problematic.

Those issues were even more profoundly highlighted during World War II. And during World War II, the Grange, which is now more a social but had originally established as somewhat of a farmer union organization to advocate for the rights of farmers, the Grange, my local Grange had a cannery where they gathered material from farmers and canned it. And that was sent overseas or sent to the military to feed the army. There was a tremendous national collective effort to feed what was perceived by all people, a really overwhelming majority of people, as a global threat in the form of Nazism and totalitarianism in the Orient. I believe it was Harry Truman that recognized that that [provisioning an army in the field] was a problem, and so there was a concentrated effort to focus production.

And these are converging influences, I believe, both the technology was improving that allowed for more efficient production of a single crop type or a few crop type farms, and also—and I'm including livestock in here as well, the technology advances as well there—and the demand for the ability for the government to purchase from single sources large quantities of material to make their efforts to support and supply the war machine more efficient. So these things converged and started really driving advances in agriculture. What we called advances in agriculture, but I'm simply going to call changes in agriculture. Because what I discovered myself, and this really is a little bit circular, but what I was discovering myself in my farming was that farming at a human scale is much more forgiving on the earth. And it's also dramatically more productive than farming mechanically.

And one of the measures of that, when I was on the board of managers, I invited Jack Rabin, who had been the director of the department of operations, experiment station executive director I think was his actual title. Jack Rabin, great guy. Who really, his only focus always was, "What is the best thing I can do for a farmer?" So he had a very sort of empirical approach to his observations. He brought his sustainable ag class to my farm, where I showed him a quarter acre plot. It was a rainy day, so you can forgive us for not spending more time. But I showed Jack on this rainy day, and his class, my peppers. I had six different varieties of peppers growing on a quarter of an acre. And the way I planted was I planted pairs of rows. And I planted them fairly close together. So in that quarter of an acre, I had the equivalent population of peppers that a commercial mechanical operation would have in an acre. And my assertion was that because it was a smaller area, it had to be managed by hand, but with comparatively less handwork than you would need for an acre. I was actually harvesting more quantity of marketable peppers off of that quarter acre than a commercial operation would get off of an acre.

So when you looked at that, and Jack's comment to me, which I found at the time sort of humorous but actually real, his comment to me was, "So you don't do anything like a normal commercial farmer." And that's, the word "normal" in his context. And I didn't take it as a ding. He was kind of, that was sort of head-scratching amazement, kind of, "You get all this

productivity, you do it on this small amount of land, you do it without using all kinds of equipment, and you're successful and effective at it." And the one thing we didn't discuss was, "Yeah, but it takes a hell of a lot of work."

So in my thinking, in my consideration, looking at how people farm today is also very much I think the same way that I could see how we build roads today. Which is, technology allows us to build a road. And I'll preface it by saying this. I can always tell when a road was originally constructed a long time ago or when it's a new road. A new road will cut through a mountain. It won't go around it. A new road will go up a really steep slope and come down a really steep slope. Old roads used to wind around things to avoid dramatic changes in incline or decline in elevation to allow the animal traction that was moving the load or the people who were walking on that road to be able to get where they were going before they're exhausted. Because if you have a horse pull or a team of oxen, if you have a team pull a load up to the top of a hill, and they're quivering in exhaustion at the top of the hill, you have to stop and let them rest because it's going to take almost as much energy, if not as much or more, to hold that load back from running over them going down the other side of the mountain.

So the concept of using technology to get places quicker and do things quicker also led to the technology where you have the consumption of land. An operator who has a 64-foot cultivator on the back of his fleet-track, 300 horsepower tractor, can till a tremendous amount of land. And he leaves an 80-foot turning row on the end of each field that a small community could use for a community garden, but is just land that is run over and tracked over because of where it is or how it is. And compaction becomes an issue. Likewise, every cloverleaf in America for highways typically has acres of unused land. And so we have created these really weird or unfortunate areas which are these islands of biological reserve. In New Jersey that translates into over 40,000 car and deer accidents a year when they change from Daylight Savings Time to Standard Time because the animals are moving at a different time than the drivers are getting to work, and now all of a sudden everybody's moving at the same time. Just a staggering cost. But that cost in part exists because these areas that are bypassed by the roads become these islands and reservoirs of biological activity that are otherwise not managed. Or minimally managed. (45:33)

So how does that translate to my perspective on farming? I believe that the right balance of farming is one where the majority—not the vast majority, but a majority of the population of the community that is eating or consuming or being fed, in other words, all living people—that a majority of all living people should be engaged to some extent, to some degree, in agriculture, so that you can have a more intimate and more directly served population. And with half of the people or more recognizing the merits or value of agriculture, it will not be marginalized. You wouldn't be able to marginalize it in the way it has been. And so also, the merit and the value of the food that those people are producing. People talk to you about, "What did you grow?" "Well, I grew this commodity or that commodity." It took me a very few short years to get to the point where when people asked me what did I produce on my farm, my answer was, "I grow food for people."

Keeping all of this in focus. I think that a blend. So on my own farm, yes, I certainly used modern equipment, as modern as I could afford, for things like large areas of cultivation, large areas of field preparation, mowing, hay production, and a whole range of other management activities that once the ground was prepared and as soon as the crops became large enough, I no longer used mechanical means to manage them. But I shifted to human means. And so a large

part of that requires individuals who learn how to work, who are skilled to work and are not afraid of working.

And I think that also will result in a greater awareness of the value of the land. We live in a very, very strange society where agricultural land is not valued, but the development value of the land is the consideration. So if I live on a farm, and I have the most fabulous and productive soil, that only has a nominal value. But if it has a great view and it's close to a road where someone or in a location where someone wants to build a house, that may have a tremendous value. So the development value of that real estate exceeds the agricultural value of the real estate. And to quote a very often-heard saw, "They're not making more land." Only in China, where there're building islands so they can have a better military presence, are they building more land. We're not building land here. We're consuming it.

And I think also farming at a human level, at a human scale, is something I learned from my grandmother, to a great extent. She always had all kinds of flowers and fruit trees and everything all around the house. And in all of her flower gardens you'd find a tomato here, a tomato plant here, a pepper plant here, string beans over there. It was a seamless palate for her in growing things. Both because that way you could be economical in your effort, and also because it made sense. It just flat-out made sense. And so I learned everything I possibly could from that and from the lessons of my parents. I learned everything I could about companion planting and different approaches to different crop production. And I looked at nature. I really watched nature as much as I possibly could. There's certain species where you will find clusters of them together in certain areas. But by and large, there's almost nowhere that I can think of on the planet where you have a monoculture of any type.

And so consequently, the thought of value has to be part of the discussion, because if what you value is the accumulation of money, then farming isn't for you. If what you value is the accumulation of wealth, then it depends on how you define wealth. And what has value to you. And I think that most people value clean water. And most people value clean air. And most people value the opportunity to have good tasting, fresh food, which if the food is grown 3,500 miles away, the only way that it can get to you and still be considered "fresh" is if you select for varieties that have shelf life, which is a different variety selection process than selecting for varieties that have good quality flavor and abundant and optimum nutritional value. So that shift also has created a consumer class who is overwhelmingly concerned with or has been overwhelmingly concerned with appearance and availability as opposed to being concerned with flavor and nutritional value. So these are once again a convergence of different influences, pressures, and vacuums that have really brought us to where we are today. Which I think in large part is quite unhealthy.

So my farming focus was one where the fundamental premise was to produce healthy food, good food for people. And so in that pursuit I found that a blend or a combination. And what I recognized shortly as I began to offer suggestions and consult for other people was that each one of these technology suite and tool suite and product types and composites, each one of these would be different for every farm and still be equally valuable and successful. So that's, I don't know if that's too far afield or too broad, but that's where my head is at. (53:52)

AA: Thank you. So you kind of covered methods and philosophies both there. Is there anything else you want to say about philosophies before we move on?

LP: Yeah, there is one other thing that I want to say about philosophy. I grew up in a Protestant Catholic theological basis. Absolutely love religious music, because frankly, much of the great classic music that's available, and much of the great music over time, is produced to glorify people's perception of God. And I have absolutely no problem or issue with any of that. What I do take issue with is the Roman Catholic tenet that had been promoted and was spoken when I was young which is the concept of God created man, and man was given dominion over the earth. That is just, as far as I'm concerned, flat-out wrong. That's a dogma that serves no one, except the people in control.

I spent very many years trying to understand what my own relationship was with religion. And what I came to as a conclusion was that I disagree with most dogma. Because dogma, very much like the labelling on that container of poison that I poisoned myself with, dogma is what folks tell you because they want to be able to control you. It doesn't necessarily reach the deeper parts of spirituality and how you can relate to your perception of your god.

And so then I went to college. And one of the things I was studying in college was geology, and I thought, "My god, here's a revelation, geologic time." On our farm we had a shale pit, so there were lots of fossils. I was always fascinated. I think everybody wants to be a treasure hunter. The concept of discovering something, discovery is great. So you find a fossil, that's really cool. What is it, what was it? And limestone, and looking at the evolution of things. And just the concept of evolution. I began to be able to have a—and I don't believe that any human being can really, but I think that we can approach an understanding of what constitutes geologic time.

So you're talking about, not thousands of years or millennia, you're talking about, not millions of years, because if you really think about it, in a very few million years you're done developing human beings through evolution. You're talking about hundreds of billions of years. That this biosphere that we call Earth has evolved into where we are as a complex living community, that in and of itself is miraculous. I don't need anybody to create miracles for me to understand and recognize how miraculous that is. It's also ruthless. I mean, because dead things are dead, living things are alive. A natural disaster can wipe out the last of anything. It's just, it is emphatic and finite. It's real, it's tangible.

And so where I started getting with my own farming, I'll give you one example. One of those years that we had the tomato project, I put in an acre of tomatoes. The USDA inspector came out and perused my field just about three weeks before harvest, two to three weeks before harvest. And he estimated that, and this is back in 1995, I think. That crop, when he finished perusing it, he said he thought that I had first-class tomatoes that would be ready in two to three weeks, that there should be about \$34,000 worth of tomatoes. That would have been a huge asset to my farm, to catapult my farming to the next level and pay a bunch of bills and all of that. And I had really worked hard on it. And September 23 we had a frost. And so that entire field of tomatoes was rendered unmarketable in the fresh tomato market, it was a hard frost. And I called around for hours trying to see if there was anybody who wanted organic processing tomatoes. And I couldn't find anyone. And so I was forced with the reality of accepting the fact that all of that work and all of that effort had been, aside from a great exercise for me, was not going to yield any marketable crop. At which point I put the plow on the tractor and went out and plowed the field in. Because you have to move on to the next thing.

So accepting the concept of reality is another thing that is absolutely intrinsic in farming. And honestly, I think that's another thing that is missing from our present society, is that so many people are so detached from the rigors of the inescapable reality that they do foolish things

that they would never otherwise do. And so looking to all of that, I find the concept of nature as a teacher and that nature is a tool of whoever the collective spiritual force of the universe or whatever the collective spiritual force of the universe is, I'm completely fine without having a name for it. I know that it exists with the same and complete conviction as any other religious devotee, and I have proof.

There's one other thing that I did want to say about this. I had been in my reading and studying, I discovered some really intriguing commentary about the concept of how societies evolve and how the society moving collaterally with the evolution of technology, the development of technology, and escalation of the use of technology, moved from being a festival-based society to a holiday-based society. And that I find fascinating, because festival-based societies are societies in which people get together at springtime for planting and fall time for harvesting. They marked naturally occurring events like the solstice and the equinox and changes of seasons. To the holiday-based society, which is one where you work and then when you get to a holiday, you take off on the holiday and play. The actual dilution of the import of those holidays is much easier. It's much easier for the 4th of July to become a big sale day, or Easter to become a big sale day, or—I'm forgetting the one in October—to become a big sales day, where a store can put on a big sale event so that they're celebrating this thing, and you can spend your money theoretically and get more. Than it is free to have a harvest festival and lose heart of the fact that what you're celebrating is the harvest, the abundance, the ability to persist for another winter and begin in another spring.

So those things I think, I know I'm sort of piling a lot in here. I would like to say that my thinking was very broad and encompassing to arrive at these. I didn't just walk down a narrow thought process to get to the conclusions that I've reached. I really reached out as broadly as I could to find anything that might inform the decisions. And then used all of the information that I had to inform them. So I think that farming should be a spiritual endeavor at whatever level. The ability to touch and hold a seed and place that seed in the soil, and then add water, is the ultimate demonstration of hope and faith. And the fact that the seed will sprout and produce a living thing is an ultimate demonstration of the fulfillment of that hope and faith. So that's where I am with that. (1:05:23)

AA: Well thank you very much for sharing that. So my fourth question here, had you written anything in response to the connection of organic/sustainable agriculture to other movements? Or do you want to skip that one and move on?

LP: Well, I didn't really have to write down. That one's always in my head. I have gathered over many years that I don't think the way other people think in that organizations and groups of peers that I have participated with comment that I have a different way of looking at things. I think to some extent that's simply because of who I am. But on another hand, that is also in part because of my life experiences. So I spent all of my school times living in one of the most urban areas in the world, which is the New York metro area, in Passaic, New Jersey. Which when I lived there had some of almost every ethnic group in town. And we interacted with each other in school, and we had our difficulties. We developed into a cohesive group, a very diverse group of people. I also on weekends and in the summer as much as possible went to the farm and farmed.

When I started my farm business, I was working as a professional musician in the New York metro area and farming as well as working at off-farm jobs to help pay for all my development stuff. And so I was actively on a weekly, if not daily basis, interacting in one of the

most urban areas in the world with a satellite suburban area and a rural area. And so to me, those things are not disconnected. There's a cohesion. I think that most people don't see it because they don't get to gain the perspective of that kind of life.

So how does that fit in with the connection with organic farming and conventional farming? When I started farming, which was market gardening with my family, we didn't call it one way or the other. We were just growing stuff to sell. Once I poisoned myself and my parents began to really avoid as much as possible chemicals, or the really noxious chemicals. And I do want to say that for years after that, my father would not permit me to prepare or spray anything unless he was standing behind me making sure that I was wearing protective equipment, etc., etc. I would like to say that I never had a chance to screw it up again.

I could see definitely—my gosh, when it comes to fertilizer, you throw a handful of 10-10-10 or 15-15-15, which is a commercial fertilizer, on something, boy, it just explodes out of the ground and grows, as long as you don't burn it by putting too much chemical fertilizer, there's always that. And you may have an abundant crop. But as I began to really explore and study and pay attention on my own farm, my own farm was an opportunity to learn. I started with the 4 ½ acres and then the 10, and then developed it into 153 acres. Some of which I owned, some which I leased.

And that as a classroom was wonderfully instructive. If I plowed a field that hadn't been plowed in 30 years, all of a sudden there would be all kinds of species of plants that hadn't been there, that I hadn't observed previously, because the seed had persisted in the soil. So I learned about the concept of a soil seed bank. And I learned that if you are persistent and observant and diligent, you can have an impact at an individual level. I plowed up one field, and all of a sudden we had jimsonweed. Jimsonweed is noxious to livestock and it also has, it produces seed pods, and the seeds have a psychedelic effect for humans. But it's just, so I made a personal commitment that anytime anywhere I saw a jimson plant growing in any one of my fields, regardless of what else I was doing, I would stop and pull it out. And they would be carried over to either a rock—and in New Jersey, where I was, boy did we have stone. So I'd find a rock where it would dry out and not be able to reseed or reroot. Then over the course of years or persistence, I reduced the incidence of it, and there came a time when I didn't have any jimsonweeds appearing in my fields.

I spoke to, I had a steer who had gotten warbles, which is an insect parasite. Fly comes along, lays its egg under the skin of the animal. And as the larva develops in the skin of the animal, when it pupates to the point of being able to fly again, it chews its way out of the animal's hide and takes off. This can be, first of all it degrades the value of hides, but second of all, that's kind of gross. But it's a natural process. So I went to my vet, and I asked my vet what could I do. And I think that he said you could sort of power-spray them with rotenone, which would kill the pest. And I thought, "That's harm!" Because now the animal has to absorb this dead pest living in its hide, blah blah blah. So I determined that what I was going to do was I was going to remove them. So I told my vet—he said, "Of course, you can try to pull them out." And so what I did was I waited until the larvae began chewing holes in the hide. And every day, twice a day, that poor steer, I went and tethered him, and I went with hydrogen peroxide and tweezers. And I pulled out every one of those larvae. Now my vet told me that there was no way to get them all. But I can tell you, with a herd of animals, and having removed them from that one, I never had that issue with any animal ever again.

In most of those instances, technologically, sure, I could have sprayed broadleaf herbicide to kill the jimsonweed, or poison ivy, which I am furiously allergic to. But I chose a

more long-term approach that was less chemically intensive and more management intensive. Those are only two examples. There are many. And I did have good success and escalating success in everything that I approached in that fashion. I had a weed problem with a weed called galinsoga. However, I also realized that if I let the galinsoga sprout, it was a very early groundcover that would protect my soil while the other plants were establishing. And then go back in and cultivate them out, and hand-weed them out, and I could control them. I could actually control them. And so reducing the weed seed bank and using what nature had offered in the context of how that could be an asset to my production model worked very well.

Now what does that have to do with conventional agriculture? Well, I can understand a farmer who has been convinced by his education and by paying attention, because if you look at the commercial literature, if you look at the literature that's available, it's all about reducing the human labor necessary to complete a task and maintain an opportunity for marketable product to exist until you harvest it. Because human labor has become the most expensive thing, and because agriculture has been absolutely devalued in our society. People can climb to the top of the tallest mountain and tallest building and tell you how much they value agriculture, and it's meaningless, because when they go to the store, they complain because they have to spend 50 cents more for something. It's lip service.

So rather than that, as I evolved, when I started farming, I started farming using hand tools and using the set of older equipment that we had developed as a family when we were market gardening. Which every time I could, I purchased more, and it wasn't often, because my money was spent more on seeds and real estate and my family. So I purchased things that were more technologically advanced every chance I got. And I started farming with equipment, my oldest tractor was a 1924 International Regular, which I actually used in production farming. I used that for basic traction work, hauling things, wagon, disc harrowing, those kind of things. And I had a 1947 International Cub. I had a number of International—my equipment was all initially International Harvester equipment. And I worked with that. I did not have a front end loader. I had fixed apparatus cultivators and fixed apparatus plows and fixed apparatus mowers. I used an Alice Chalmers WD with a John Deere No. 7 sickle bar mower for making hay. Unfortunately, the first baler that I bought was a Ford, and it was a piece of junk. And I used it one year and ended up cutting it up for scrap and to use the metal for other things because it just didn't work right. And there were a few things like that, that came at a high cost to me personally because I didn't have the money to spend or to throw away. (1:19:18)

And so I started out with older equipment that required lots of maintenance. And I would go down to the local tractor parts store and bump into other farmers who were buying other things and look at what they were getting, and look at the new equipment, and go to farm sales and auctions. I was just always paying attention to what was available and what was going on. I would be confronted in meetings and other situations by other farmers, who would grouse at me that, "All you organic farmers, there are all these programs to help you organic farmers. I've been farming all my life, and I don't get any help." There was a great deal of suspicion and resentment.

And I finally, I didn't lose my patience, because I could understand, the new kid on the block, everybody experiences that sometimes. But the one meeting that we were in in the county board of agriculture—I think it might even have been a state board of agriculture meeting, when somebody was belittling or grousing at organic farming. I said, "Look, I can understand, you're more than welcome to your opinion. But I'm actually happy that you guys are all in business, all you conventional farmers. I disagree with the way you farm, I made my choices. But I'm

actually really happy that you're in business, and I hope you stay in business and do well. Because if I need to go to the tractor store to buy a part, if I'm the only farmer, there won't be any tractor store. I won't be able to get parts. If I'm the only guy who's in this, there's no way I can keep farming. So at least I recognize that we really kind of all need each other, because there are only, there are fewer and fewer people operating commercial farms. Look at John Deere. John Deere is building more lawn mowers than they are farm tractors. Which way do you want this thing to go? You can stand there and throw stones at me because you find what I'm doing threatening or you don't like what I'm doing, but I'm not going to throw stones at you because I don't like what you're doing. I'm going to try to show you that my way is a better choice, and you can choose to believe it or not. But in the meanwhile, I'm not going to do anything to sabotage you, because I really recognize that we're kind of all in this together. You may believe the false narrative that we're in competition. We're not in competition."

That was another thing that I realized very early on. There is no farmer who is producing food for people in the United States who is actually really competing with any other farmer, other than immediately locally. Because the marketplace is so large that you can find a place to sell your material. I realized that early on. And so once I recognized that I was actually not, I used to tell them, "It's not possible for you to compete with me. You just can't. Because the number of people who want what you have to sell and the number of people who want what I have to sell far exceed what we both have to sell combined. There's no way we can possibly meet that market. So stop competing and start collaborating. Figure out how to help each other be more successful, and we will all be more successful together."

And that really seemed to, there were some people who just wrote me off as a nut case, but there were plenty who listened and who sort of got it. I had one of the lessons that I learned by observing as an organic advocate. So I'm going to pause and say that in my 20s, while looking for how, trying to come to terms with what I wanted to accomplish with my life, I decided or recognized, more it was revealed to me, that being a successful advocate for organic agriculture was a worthy life's work. And so consequently when I was first starting out, I started building the farm because I figured that building an organic farm and being successful with that would be a great thing to point to. And then as I became more engaged in the politics of agriculture and the agricultural community at large, I recognized that the more successful I became at that, the more people I would reach. And through influencing legislation and working at a state level, and even nationally, I would have a chance of having a broader impact for organic advocacy.

And then subsequent to that, when I was president of the board of agriculture and president of the county board and president of all of them, sort of had reached the apex of those things, I recognized that now there were people who were paying attention. And what I really needed to do was I really needed to show them how successful an organic farm could be. And so I had started a CSA. Along with my CSA membership, I had started a market in Manhattan, in Hell's Kitchen, on west 43rd Street between 9th and 10th Avenue at Manhattan Plaza. And that still persists to this day, that market. So just being successful at farming and marketing was where my focus was at that point.

And interacting with conventional growers and being an advocate for agriculture in the broad perspective is just, I don't divorce the two things, because really there is so much that any farmer needs that every other farmer needs access to, even in terms of community support—ordinances, laws, rules, regulations, all of that. You can't just sort of pick and choose which one you're going to advocate for. Now, I have absolutely serious and redline deal breaker objections

to things like how manure storage is managed in certain operations, how livestock agriculture is managed in confinement operations, monoculture in conventional agriculture, lots of those. However, even so, I see there's also areas of commonality.

One of my friends and acquaintances, a gentleman named Ed Lidzbarski, who was one of the, actually a beautiful grower. I mean, he just really, it would be funny to say that a vegetable grower had a green thumb or that a farmer had a green thumb, but Ed's just, his attention to detail in his farming, was really, really very well done. Exemplary. And one day, I was a member of my county board of agriculture and Ed was in a different county—one day, everybody was talking about the fact that this nut case in central Jersey had chained himself to his next door neighbor's spray rig. And that was Ed. Ed chained himself to his neighbor's spray rig to prevent him spraying in an adjacent field to his vegetables. And everybody was talking about that for a little while.

And so I started, that gave an opportunity to have a conversation about what the impacts on organic farming are from adjacent conventional farms and how, just like you wouldn't do things that are agriculturally inconsiderate with an adjacent conventional farmer, you shouldn't do things that are agriculturally inconsiderate with an organic farmer. You don't need to. There's no need for you to spray that close. You can sort of move back a little bit, or you can change your approach to what you do, plant something that doesn't require something. If it's at the edge of a field, there's going to be a machine turning row, you don't need to spray that. There's any number of ways of managing that differently. So you don't risk your neighbor's crop.

And what I recognized in that moment was that a radical activist like Ed was absolutely just as critical to moving and advancing the organic farming movement forward as someone like myself who was considered successful in the conventional agricultural political structure and successfully organic farming, because his activism allowed me to have a platform, not a platform, but allowed me to have a conversation from that platform that had a positive and less confrontational but actually more impactful, more meaningful conversation to cause people to think about how they approached the relationship of organic and conventional farmers.

And that was something that was really, really valuable in recognizing both. And there's a physical example that's really simple. If you're trying to move an object and you push on it and push on it and push on it, and you increase the degree of force that you're exerting, friction keeps it from moving. If there's that one little impact that causes a jolt enough to cause it to move, then it requires much less force to keep moving than you were exerting to try to move it initially. And I think that that's a really understandable sort of parallel with the value of overt activism and that steady pressure from an advocate, a more measured advocate.

How's that? I think I've gotten to a good place to pause there. (1:32:00)

AA: Yeah, thank you. So I'd like to hear your opinion on certification. I know you worked as an inspector for a little bit. If you could tell us something about that. And then, I know there's debates on certification and the NOP and whether that's been a positive thing or a negative thing. And I'd be curious to hear your perspective on that.

LP: Yeah, okay. Well, so as I had mentioned earlier, my own path to be an effective advocate for organic agriculture, there was once again another confluence of events in 2009. My ex-wife decided that she was done with the rigors of the farm and the difficulties of living with me, and so she initiated divorce. And so we had a divorce in 2009. The economy collapsed in 2008/2009. And also round about the same time, I suffered a personal loss through the death of a person who

had been a friend and mentor for well over 20 years. So I was in really bad shape. I made a commitment to provide the best CSA share that I could. That was in 2010. I did everything I could to restructure the debt around the farm after equitable distribution. I do have to say that my ex-wife was not punishing in how she managed, I think we had, it was difficult and daunting for me, and we probably had a reasonable divorce settlement.

And just trying to work my way through finances and get everything done with the economic downtrend. I was unable to continue farming. I just didn't have enough equity remaining in the property after the equitable distribution against the mortgage to be able to persist. And while I took in a considerable amount of income or revenue—it wasn't really income, it was revenue—in that last year with the CSA, I was emotionally damaged to the point where I was ineffective in my farming or not as effective as I could have been. I just couldn't swing it. It just didn't work. So I needed to shutter the farm. And in September of 2010 I surrendered my certificate. That was really poignantly difficult for me, because up until that point I had worked my whole life towards that.

And I had, post-divorce, I had been approaching everybody who was reasonably successful or that I considered to be successful and who I considered or respected for their life accomplishment, and asking them, if they were in my situation, what would they do? Because honestly, while I had worked in construction throughout my adult life as an off-farm job, on and off, variously, run a couple different companies, worked with the union, carpenters' union, done all that, in addition to working as a musician. What do you do when you have nothing but bills and you have to find a new source of income?

So the day that I surrendered my certificate, when I was having my last inspection, I asked the inspector, who had been a person that I had worked with previously through NOFA, I knew her well. Elaine Ferry. And I asked her if she was in my shoes what would she do. And her comment was, "Well, if you're serious, we're desperate for inspectors who have practical experience, because there are too many people who are organic inspectors who have no actual practical experience." And Elaine also was working at that time with Whole Foods Market to help them develop their livestock inspection program. And so she called them also and recommended based on my experience that they reach out to me and see if I could be added as an inspector for them.

So this is sitting at my kitchen table, she made two phone calls, one to the folks at Whole Foods. Someone there never got back to me. And one to the International Organic Inspectors' Association who basically she told she was going to have me call them, but that she was endorsing my application and thought I would be an excellent resource. So I called IOIA, I called the folks at Whole Foods, and once again, like I said, had no response. And called IOIA and spoke to the executive director explaining what my experience was and what my personal history with organic was. Who said that I should put it in a statement and a resume, but it sounded to her like they would be able to waive some of the preliminary requirements for me to engage in training.

And so the first certificate that I applied for was the first one that they had available, which was a training in collaboration with the Non-GMO project for Non-GMO certification inspections. And then the second one actually, believe it or not, was the pasture practice standard. Which is the standard whereby an inspector and an operator would be able to demonstrate in empirical terms that an operation is providing more than 30 percent, 30 percent or more, of the forage materials to their livestock, ruminant livestock, through pasture. Which is considered one of the more complex certification inspection elements to complete. And then

subsequent to that I took—and these are only in this sequence because this is the sequence in which these trainings were available—then subsequent to that I took the farm, the general farm, vegetable farming inspector training. And then livestock training.

So here we are, that was 2010, and it is 2021 and I have somewhere around 40 certificates at this point for all kinds of advanced training and specific elements for inspection. And I remain eternally grateful to Elaine, because actually as an inspector, once again, I had the opportunity to have a positive impact as both an advocate and a participant in organic agriculture that is very broad. So I jumped into that fulltime. Slowly, as I developed more experience as an inspector and started working with a number of different certifiers, who I became more enmeshed in the aspects of certification.

And I had all along, so I'm going to go back in time a step, just because it is somewhat out of sequence, but the National Organic Standards Board, when it was first formed, the formative National Organic Standards Board had hearings on the proposed rule when the regulation was first proposed. So the law passed in 1990. It was 20 years—is that right?

AA: I think it was 12 years, to 2002.

LP: Twelve years. It was twelve years. So 2012 this rule was ready to put into effect. And you know, I had been engaged in conversations during much of the period and increasing in frequency getting closer to 2012 when this rule was announced. With many organic practitioners, some of whom were just going to go and do something else, or go and farm the way they farmed organically and call it something else, because they believed at their core that if the government was involved there would be absolutely no way that this would serve the philosophical, ethical, and moral tenets of the completely disparate global community of organic practitioners had been working to develop through the International Federation of Organic Movements, all of these different organizations. As a community, we were contentious, opinionated, and everybody was advocating for what they thought was the best to be organic agriculture.

And it was only, it only arose to an issue that was more centrally political when the dollar value of the organic movement began to become apparent. So when it looked like this might be an economic engine, regardless of how many senators and congresspeople referred to it as niche agriculture, or for that matter, the universities and research institutes were calling it niche agriculture. The sort of looking down their nose at organic farmers as sort of Birkenstock-wearing, long hair, unshaven hippies. So here we were now, finally, with the rule that was proposed. And everybody who was looking at having or gaining financially from organic being a market label that would now suddenly be regulated was lobbying for the regulations to be favorable to them. To the extent that the rules were originally published and the irradiation of food, the use of biosolids, which is a euphemism for sewage sludge, treated sewage sludge, and genetic engineered material still would have been allowed in organic agriculture.

Now, the real bugaboo is that a lot of people immediately voiced the opinion that those three deal-breakers were left in the equation specifically to permit the opportunity for the organic-centrists and maybe radicals to have a “win” in having those regulated out, if there was an issue of contention. As a distractor from having other issues addressed, such as—and I believe it was either Perdue or Tyson or both, who were lobbying to be able to have their poultry called organic and still feed them conventional feeds on the basis that organic feeds were not commercially available. So this raised the specter of, can you still call something organic if

you're producing it using the practices but using conventional materials because organic materials are not commercially available. (1:48:05)

So hindsight being 20/20, I think at this point what happened was pretty fabulous. There were over 300,000 negative comments to the rule, so much so that the rule, the process was stopped and the rule was actually refined and retooled specifically to remove sewage sludge and irradiation. And then they put in a category called "prohibited practices," into which were lumped genetic engineering and genetic manipulation. Other than historically applied breeding practices.

And so the politicization of organic happened really the moment the USDA passed the rule. Because when the law was passed, it was established that this would come into effect when the rule was actuated. And when the rule became the effective law or the administrator of the law, at that point the USDA owned the use of the word "organic." So once the USDA owns the use of the word "organic," they can decide what it means. Now, the foresighted drafters of the law, who came up with the concept of an advisory board, the National Organic Standards Board, to advise the secretary or the national organic program on how to proceed and how this board is designed and who sits on it and how it determines adjustments, is all an open and transparent process.

However, unfortunately, it's still a politicization. You have the—Secretary Vilsack just announced, and I'm not going to be able to think of the right acronym, but the livestock, the humane standards or the livestock standards that would have reflected the requirement for livestock to have access to, to be able to exercise their normal physiological behaviors. In other words, you can't have them overcrowded in housing. They have to have access to fresh water. They have to have access to pasture. Even poultry, all animals have to have access to outdoors where they have access to be able to scratch in the ground and be able to engage in normal behaviors. So the sequence of events after the pasture practice standard was enacted, there was a press to enact or activate part of the rule that was called the organic livestock and poultry practices. And that would be a final rule, once again.

So consider this. We are in 2021. The rule was enacted in 2012. So we still don't have all of the final rules done. But the organic livestock and poultry practices, and the recommendations were made, the process was engaged, the constituents and stakeholders were polled. And it really came consistently to support the development of this standard. And the standards required that poultry would have access to out-of-doors and that they would be on the ground, they would have access to sunlight even if they didn't eat, because how much are they going to consume. That's not so much an issue as that they have the opportunity to exercise their normal physiological behaviors. And somehow that just was not passed. That was squashed. It was just at the end of the Obama administration, it looked like it was going to go through, and then when Trump came in it was shelved. It was tabled.

So once again now, Secretary Vilsack has just announced that they're going to begin the rulemaking process again to address the statutory interpretation. So this is another—and it's funny, because we have heard in politics, particularly with issues like voting and racism and other similar issues that people, I'm just trying to—the Juneteenth, that this was something that was started years and years ago and that people have persisted for lifetimes in trying to get laws passed that recognize these things which are just now coming to pass. So it appears that we may actually achieve these goals. But it will have taken large pieces of people's lifetimes to come this far.

And some of those goals may still be at risk. So one of the issues, one of the points that I take particular issue with is hydroponics. The fundamental premise of the organic food production act states that you have to protect, preserve, and improve the soil. And so consequently, California, lobbied by large producers who wanted to produce hydroponic or plants in containers that are fed nutrients through liquid solutions, California CCOF passed that, approved that, and then created a precedent that the United States is the only producer of organic products where hydroponic products are acceptably certified as organic. So the hydroponics that are produced here can't be sold anywhere else in the world as organic. Conversely, because of that, hydroponically produced tomatoes from Europe can be sold in the United States as organic when they can't be sold as organic in the EU. So that creates pressure on farmers.

So as the economic impact of organic broadens through the globe and as more people become accessible to it, we have to persist in our contention with these political pressures to weaken and dilute the merits of organic certification and what it means to be a certified producer. One of the elements of that, Rodale started a project with a number of other collaborators called the Real Organic, which is a further validation of organic practices and has clearly stated that their fervent hope is that their certificate becomes unnecessary because—and all of our hope is that the NOP will adhere to the philosophies, ethos, and moral bases of organic agriculture over financial and political pressure. And that's where things stand today. I think that's enough said on that one. (1:57:26)

AA: Thank you very much! So we're pretty much at time now, but thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. In the last two minutes, is there anything quick you want to say to wrap up, or are you good?

LP: In the last two minutes. Well, I would like to say one thing. For every person who insists that if we all produced organic food the world would starve, that is absolutely a monumental fallacy. If we tried to produce organic food using conventional farming practices, yeah, we wouldn't succeed, because you have to change the paradigm. And the other thought that I have that I would ask anyone is, since when and who decided that it's okay for us to eat food that is produced using poison? That's, if you start there, you have to come to some very different conclusions.

I also believe that since one of the greatest lacking or greatest deficiencies in our current society's purpose, that if more people were engaged in agriculture, more people would find purpose. And I think with that I will leave it as 'nuf said.

AA: Thank you, Leonard! Thank you very much for all those insights, and you have a great day.

LP: You too. (1:59:10)